

# Don Bosco in Cambodia

*Cooperation between lay people and religious for the education of the youth of Cambodia.*

Cambodia is a country in Southeast Asia with over 90% of its population Buddhist and a very small Christian minority.

The presence of the Salesians of Don Bosco in Cambodia dates back to 1991, when the Salesians arrived from Thailand where they were taking care of the technical education of war refugees along the border between the two countries, under the leadership of Salesian Brother Roberto Panetto and Salesian past pupils from Bangkok.

After training some 3,000 young people, the latter, who were about to be repatriated to Cambodia, asked the Salesians to go with them. The Salesians did not let that invitation fall on deaf ears, realising that that was where God wanted them at that moment, and that those were the young people calling on Don Bosco. The challenges were and are many, in a non-Christian cultural environment and in a very poor society.

On 24 May 1991, feast of Mary Help of Christians, the Salesian presence began in Cambodia, with an orphanage and the Don Bosco technical school in Phnom Penh, officially opened on the feast of Don Bosco, 31 January 1994. In 1992, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians also reached the country and their work offers hope to many poor and abandoned girls in a country where more than half the total population is female and where women are victims of violence, abuse and human trafficking.

The Salesians have established technical institutes and schools in five provinces of the country: Phnom Penh, Kep, Sihanoukville, Battambang and Poipet. The enormous educational and pastoral work is only made possible thanks to the invaluable contribution of the laity. Almost all the staff involved in the Salesian structures are former students who

are continuously committed to giving the best to the students in formation. This is a concrete application of shared responsibility and of the many invitations to share the mission.

The Salesians have established an NGO in Cambodia with no religious affiliation. Commonly known as the fathers, brothers and sisters of Don Bosco, they are loved and respected by all. There is a great love and partnership between the Salesians and past pupils in Cambodia, which contributes to the popularity and 100% placement rate of the students over the last ten years, as Fr Arun Charles, an Indian missionary in Cambodia since 2010, recently appointed as coordinator of missionary animation in the East Asia-Oceania region, tells us. The Salesians encourage minors to complete the primary education cycle, through support projects for children, the construction of primary school buildings in poor villages, and the management of some literacy centres. In Battambang, brick factories retain children to work as labourers, and there Salesian education aims to offer an alternative and hope for a different future.

One of the specialities of the Salesian mission in Cambodia is the hotel school, which provides instruction in hospitality, cooking and hotel management, having a full hotel to enable students to gain practical experience in their field, in addition to workshops and exercises.

The visit of the Rector Major Fr Juan Edmundo Vecchi in 1997, a very important moment of encouragement, focused on the exhortation to build an educative and pastoral community and to put Don Bosco's Preventive System into practice, has remained in their memory.

Don Bosco's missionary gaze continues to to be alive almost 10,000 km from Valdocco, always with and for the young, in the Salesian presences in Phnom Penh, Poipet and Sihanoukville.

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